

Craig Vear

Three Last Letters (In Memoriam of Capt. Scott, Dr. Wilson, and Lt. Bowers)

(2012)

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A Play for Musicians

For 3 instrument, 3 voices, 3 laptops and live diffused soundscape

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Score

## Notes for performers

*Three Last Letters* is a play for musicians, in so much as each musician has a responsibility to a narrative exposition – however abstract this may be – and approaches the performance embracing the many definitions of the word *play* (noun and verb). The role of the musician is to contribute to a sense of place *within* the source material: in this case the last moments in the minds of Scott, Wilson and Bowers as they await death, alone in a tent on Antarctica 100 years ago. Of paramount importance is that each musician enters into the spirit of the piece.

The musician auralises a response through improvisation to the ongoing development of the two scores: the visual and the aural. The objective of the musician is to work in collaboration with all these elements. The evolving composition will be a negotiation between the ears and the eyes, the intellect and the imagination.

Each vocalist and instrumentalist pair will share a computer, but have an individual screen. The computer will generate a visual score from a fixed library containing found materials: text from the final entry's in Scott's diary, the final letters home from Scott, Bowers and Wilson (respectively), extracts from *Sea Slumber Song* by Elgar. At times the visual score for the instrumentalist will appear on the vocalist screen. There is a relationship between the pair.

At any given moment, for any given duration a musician's response can be positioned between literal and abstract associations to the visual and/or aural stimulus. A response can move freely across this range, it can identify with individual elements within the collective soundworld, or the duet relationship, or the fragments of visual information. It can be proactive or reactive; it can be independent or dependent. Alternatively the musician can choose to do nothing.

The visual texts can be read in their original syntax, or as abstract poetry, graphic score, libretto/lyrics, materials for looping, cut-copy-paste or sampling and

sound processing techniques. A change in the on-screen score does not necessarily dictate a change in your response.

## Notes to vocalists

The *playing* of the text and visual score can involve speech, song, chant or Sprechstimme (sung speech), or a mixture or combination of these. This can include vocal sounds, emotional utterance or language. All sounds must be performed using a microphone. The vocalist must consider where their contribution fits regarding the superfield soundscape: foreground (e.g. sung), midground (e.g. chorus Sprechstimme) or background (e.g. looped speech, utterance, sound effects).

## Notes to instrumentalists

Each instrumentalist is asked to consider their responses from two perspectives: the immensity of the continent; and the smallness of the individual human during this tragic event. This is not a request to 'sound paint' but to focus an approach within an individual soundworld towards one or the other perspective.

This may manifest in a simple duality between extended techniques (multiphonics, sul-pont arco, banks of pedals), and slow/ adagio melodic lines. In any case, the visual score should be considered a common library of notes, inter-relationships (intervals) and harmonic attractors (the DNA profile of something other), and not a post-modern reconceptualization of an established composition.

## INSTRUCTIONS

On each USB score you will find two coloured files:

Green – normal score

Red – emergency score

For normal performance

1. ensure all computers are connected to the same LAN
2. double click on green score
3. Go to set-up page and follow instructions
4. MOVE TFT SCREEN onto instrumentalists display
5. Scott only – on Q press *Start*; others to start automatically (others – press start only if Scott is performing and your screen remains unchanged)

EMERGENCY procedure

In the event that a score crashes:

1. double click on red score
2. move TFT screen onto instrumentalist display
3. Press *Start* (a message will be sent to the network manager who will manually trigger the final sequences)

## Programme Notes

*Three Last Letters* is a music composition that imagines the last moments in the mind of Scott before he dies in the tent, alone. It will be created using facts and suppositions surrounding these last moments and will include a library of found materials:

- Text from the final entry's in Scott's diary
- The final letters home from Scott, Bowers and Wilson
- Antarctic field recordings from my BAS composer residency in 2003-4

- Music materials (specifically *We love the place*, *O God*, and *Sea Slumber Song* by Elgar)

- Other sound and music that take the minds of the audience to this lonely place.

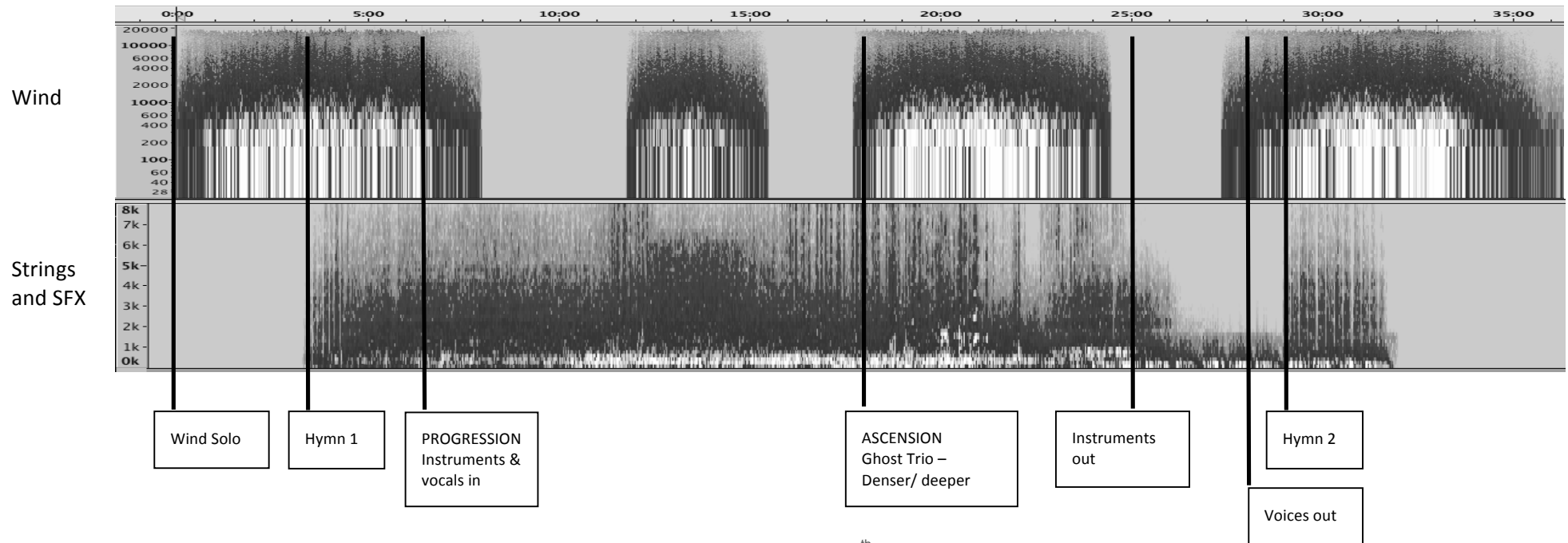
These materials are the basic elements of the composition and will be subjected to a number of treatments. A bespoke software score will be developed using these found textual materials (score and words) as the visual elements. The role of the musician is to contribute to a sense of place, they will respond to the on-going visual and aural score through improvisation using their voice or their instrument. Each musician has a responsibility to a narrative exposition – however abstract this may be – but the main concern is to take the mind of the audience to this other place: a 'dimension' for their minds eye to wander.

In performance the audience will sit in the round in near darkness. They will face the centre of the circle where the musicians perform: the three instrumentalists sitting facing out with the vocalists standing above them, each pair sharing laptop scores. The performers will be lit with a tight focussed blood-red lantern from above evoking the famous Antarctic Pyramid Tent, and the ghostly presence of the other.

Surround sound speakers will encircle the audience at times immersing them in the immensity of white sonic space, or shrinking perception towards the claustrophobic sense of being in the tent.

The mix of the live ensemble (fragments of melodies, held chords, spoken text, word play), the disembodied voice of "Scott", the ghost sextet, processed and treated recordings and a soundscape created from the found sound library will be diffused live. The experience will be vivid, phenomenal and touching, offering a variety of possible interrelationships generated by the open work process.

## Temporal and frequency design (rough timings)



This piece was commissioned by Vale Of Glamorgan Festival. Premiere was at Arts Central, Barry 7<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

The performers were:

- Michael Lambourne – voice
- Stephen Langstaff – voice
- Craig Yates – voice
- Roger Heaton – bass clarinet
- Audrey Riley – 'cello (music director)
- James Woodrow – electric guitar

'Ghost' performers

- Paul Shelley – voice of Scott
- Angharad Davis - violin
- Brigit Carey - viola
- Audrey Riley – 'cello (arranger and music director)

Dedicated to Ann Elizabeth Vear (1945-2011)

## Software Scores, Parts and Media Disc

The enclosed disc contains

- software scores for each performer pair (Scott, Bowers, and Wilson) complete with media libraries (in Max/MSP 5)
- performance environment for the soundscape (in Reaper)
- technical manager and emergency procedure system (in Max/MSP 5)
- copy of the premiere performance as an indicator to the approach in the realisation of this composition
- instructional video on the algorithmic processes within the software.